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ABSTRACT

This speech presents observations, made on a trip in June 1976, of the aesthetic environments of children in China, Japan, and Hong Kong. Home, school and day care environments are compared in terms of living and play space, room decor, the presence of art and toys, dramatic play and performance, music, nature and outdoor appreciation, food and clothing. A limited amount of residential space was evident in all the countries visited. Space available to day care centers and kindergartens fluctuated greatly in China and Hong Kong, whereas in Tokyo generous amounts of outdoor space were provided as a policy for kindergartens. In China, children's art was confined to art classrooms. Folk art and traditional art forms were highly encouraged, however, and Chinese children often showed a high level of skill. Hong Kong child care centers and Japanese kindergartens were filled with colorful posters, toys, and children's art; Japanese kindergartens also provided children with exposure to traditional dress and ritual. In China, emphasis was placed on public performance of dance, drama, and music featuring real-life themes related to national goals. Dramatic play was observed in Hong Kong and puppet dramas were common in Japan but there was little emphasis on public performance in either site. Exposure to beautiful outdoor plant and flower arrangements was available in Japan; in contrast, outdoor space was generally used for vegetable gardening in China. It is concluded that the growth of aesthetic sensibility and artistic skills is encouraged in each of the sites visited, although different factors are emphasized in each milieu. (SB)

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Aesthetics in Asian Child Care Settings

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Formal version of talk perpared for the meetings of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, 1977, for a symposium ~~xxxxxxx~~ (chaired by Dr. Alice S. Honig) on Childhood in Asia: visits to preschools and child education settings in Japan, China, and Hong Kong.

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Aesthetics in Asian Child Care Settings

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Aesthetics involves the development of taste, appreciation and love for the beautiful which pervades all aspects of living.

Few early childhood education models have articulated as a clear program goal the fostering of aesthetic appreciation. There are indeed some notable exceptions. Maria Montessori, for example, considered discrimination learning of form and color not only important in its own right but fundamental for the development of aesthetic appreciation. The British Open Education model has promoted such curricular aspects of aesthetic development as movement to music. The CEMREL Institute has sponsored research efforts to promote the integration of artistic activities into early education programs.

During June, 1976, a group of thirty early childhood educators (under the co-directorship of Drs. Bettye Caldwell and Rosestelle Woolner) were privileged to visit day care centers and nurseries in factory and commune, kindergartens, hospital and teacher training institute and schools in the People's Republic of China as well as child care settings in Hong Kong and Japan. Our intensive tour of school environments where Asian children learn as well as our view of them in parks, shops, and streets in Tokyo, Kyoto, Peking, Shanghai, Kwangchow and Hong Kong provided clues for a comparison of similarities and differences in the ways in which young children are given aesthetic experiences in each cultural milieu.

The aesthetic climate of a child's environment depends on many factors, including ecological considerations such as the size and variety of spaces available to children in comparison to their sizes and numbers. What kinds of textures, colors, decorations and spatial arrangements are available in interior and exterior decors? Is there clutter or harmony, monotony or possibly overstimulation? Kinds, colors and shapes of equipment and toys contribute to the quality of an aesthetic environment. Whether program activities are appropriately organized, and whether there is harmonious variation among active and quiet times available to children may help to sensitize them to a sense of beauty in the rhythms of days. Whether access to beauty in nature is readily and generously available will play a role. Adult efforts to enhance theatrical performances and dances with costumes and adornments of person will affect aesthetic sensibility. Opportunities to create and enjoy art, to play, listen, move and dance to music and rhythms must also be considered in assessing the aesthetic quality of life for children. The tastefulness, both literally and figuratively of foods, their color, variety, texture and cultural meaningfulness can add to aesthetic as well as eating pleasure in the lives of children.

In the three cultural milieux we visited, different emphases were sometimes observed with respect to each of the factors contributing to the development of aesthetic awareness and pleasures. Thus although one factor appropriate for enhancing aesthetic experience might be underplayed in one cultural setting, another factor might be highly developed and richly serve to stimulate the

children's sense of beauty. How each of the three Asian sites provided in its own special ways for the aesthetic development of children was fascinating to observe. Certainly, a cross-cultural perspective on the ways in which particular aspects of aesthetics are either little-emphasized or carried to a high art may help us to become more aware in our own child care settings of how we bring a sense of aesthetics peripherally or pervasively into the lives of our children.

Space for Play and Living

In general, home space conditions were very crowded and minimal for the Asian children. In Hong Kong, a family lodging often consisted of a one or two room apartment within a complex of crowded large-block apartment houses. In the lower-storied worker residences we visited in Peking, a similar lack of personal space was seen. Living quarters might consist of one or two rooms, with kitchen and toilet facilities shared with several other families. However, in group care settings the amount of space available for young children varied greatly and was sometimes quite spacious in terms of playground and classroom areas available.

In one textile - factory nursery in China, sixteen toddlers and their two caregivers were crowded into what appeared to be about a 9 by 10 foot room furnished only with two small tables at which the toddlers were being fed. Crib space was lacking in their sleep room, but colorful warm quilts were placed on the floor for use during nap time. In contrast, other child care settings were spacious and gave a sense of freedom for movement. One kin-

dergarten play yard had room enough not only for large communal swings and see-saws but also had ample grounds for relay races, circle games, outdoor doll play and truck-driver games as well as a large concrete swimming pool in which dozens of youngsters splashed joyously.

The same fluctuation in spatial comfort of facilities was evident in the Hong Kong day care centers visited. Most had sufficient rooms for variations of environment during the long day care period. Yet the sleeping cots provided for the large numbers of children cared for were often of necessity placed side by side in long crowded rows that did not promote a sense of personal peace and privacy which can be available where smaller numbers of children attend a center.

In Tokyo, we noted the generous amount of outdoor play space that kindergarten children had available in contrast to very limited home living space. Our guides explained that the education system for school children is very competitively oriented and involves great stress on academics and lack of free time for older students. Therefore there is a dedicated attempt on the part of early childhood educators to encourage free play activities and creative space so that the preschool child can enjoy and explore fully not only his indoor but outdoor environment too - both on climbing, swinging, and jumping equipment and with water and sand play abundantly available.

Room Decor, Art and Toys

In China, interior school environments, even when adequately spacious and well lit, were often extremely drab. Monotonous wall

tones and the absence in general of children's art work in all but art classrooms was typical of many schools and day care rooms. Chairman Mao's portrait often provided the single focus of pictorial or color interest on a classroom wall. The dullness of room walls in general was occasionally happily broken by colorful chalkboard notices such as a welcome to us visitors. Borders of flowers decorated the graceful Chinese-character greetings. On an outside wall of one spacious kindergarten was a single wall mural of costumed smiling children with arms linked in friendship. In the art classroom, children's art work was indeed on display. The level of realism and talent at pictorial representation was often very high.

One eleven year old girl described to me through an interpreter an entire series of six detailed drawings that she had made. The drawings were on display in the art class. Her series told the story of a group of youngsters who had gone down to a commune to help the peasants during the harvesting season. One of their tasks was to shovel human excrement for use as a fertilizer. In the drawings, the arrival of the children to help and their work shoveling the manure was depicted. In the next sequence one could see that one little girl held her nose in disgust, refused to shovel the manure and ran away from the group. Then in the picture series an old peasant took the little girl aside. While they sat under a tree together he carefully explained to her how valuable manure is for helping to produce a good crop to feed the people. In another picture the enlightened child was then seen going back to work at manure-shovelling with such a will that crayoned sweat drops were clearly visible streaming down her face! The last picture showed all the children and the old pea-

sant waving good-bye happily to each other as the children set off on their long walk back to the city and their school. Artistic productions were very tied to the world of real experiences, problems and accomplishments.

Teachers explained that there is both a free drawing period when the children can each choose a topic of preference, and a drawing period when the group as a whole draws according to the lesson plan for that class. We spent some time in a class during free drawing. Some of the topics I watched being very competently executed by third graders included mighty electrical power transformers marching across a commune landscape, large cargo ships unloading goods, and young children crossing a street with the help of a traffic light and policeman.

Folk art and traditional art forms were highly encouraged and sensitively carried out by children and adults in China. We adults were in considerable awe of the complex paper figures folded by kindergarten children who generously offered their creations to us, the "meigwa pengyou" (American friends), as souvenirs of our visit. In a teacher training school we visited, young adults were producing marvels of intricate designs, both abstract and figural, through paper folding and cutting. Thus, while individual art work was infrequently displayed in Chinese classrooms, activities involving traditional folk art forms and motifs were highly valued and carried out as aesthetic expressions of the people and the culture.

In contrast to the dearth of visible toys sometimes encountered in day care classrooms, the wards of the Children's Hospital in Peking were provisioned with colorful, interesting, and cuddly toys

for sick children. Games and reading materials were freely available and used by the children, who were permitted to visit and play with each other. Despite the presence of medical equipment, such as intravenous feeding devices attached to children, the wards often resembled play spaces rather than simply sickrooms.

The wall and shelf decor in Hong Kong child care centers often dazzled our eyes with posters, toys, children's art work and constructions. Both in Japan and in Hong Kong there seemed to be a plentiful supply and variety of toys available in a rainbow of colors.

In Japanese kindergartens aesthetic touches in classroom decor testified to a pervasive and exquisite sensibility to color, pattern, and artistic arrangement. Examples included even the way books were set out in the book corner, the way cubby holes were set up with colorful shoes and slippers (which the children must change appropriately for playing indoors or out every time they move from the one evironment to the other), the way a doll play corner was arranged in a special intimate room with tatami mats. Exposure to the traditional dress, the kimono, with its elaborate ornamental sash, the obi, was a part of every child's cultural experience. Also, kimonos were provided in the drawers of a chest in one dress-up area. In a large kindergarten we visited, during lunch hour the principal herself dressed in kimono and graciously treated us to a concert of musical selections on the long-stringed koto. We were also guests at a tea ceremony, whose elements include slow, stylized rituals of admiration and respect for the beauty of the ceremonial tea preparations and service as well as for the beauty of the serving bowls.

Classroom walls in Japan displayed children's art work in profusion. Large easels and children enthusiastically painting at them were prominent in kindergarten classrooms both in Hong Kong and Japan. Japanese kindergartens had puppet stages, with the scenery and puppet stage curtains painted with cheery, realistic figures by the kindergarten children themselves.

Dramatic Play and Performance

Chinese child care personnel promote children's public performance of dance, drama, and music to an extent and of a virtuosity which we found continuous and remarkable. Props and costumes, created specifically for dramatic play episodes for ballets and for pantomimes in the schools we visited, were characterized by grace and gaity. The finale of a performance of dance and music by even very young children often visually resembled a keleidoscope of color and beauty. Culture in terms of public performance for others is vigorously promoted among children at every age. Children learn to perform plays and dances for each other as well as for guests, both in the local day care centers and schools as well as in the special Palaces for children and youth which are equipped to train children in a wide variety of cultural activities and performing arts. In Shanghai we visited one of the ten district Children's Palaces and a central city Youth Palace.

In contrast to this public presentation of cultural accomplishments by children in China, we encountered no emphasis in Japan or Hong Kong on staged public performance and preparation for such public cultural performances by young children. In China we were treated constantly to performances of classic ballet (including toe shoe dancing in red slippers by five year olds), poetry recitation, dramatic

play,folk dance, piano playing, instrument recitals, songs and choruses, by children from preschool age through the late teens.

Often, as we arrived at a kindergarten many of the youngsters greeting us would already be wearing the glowing and tell-tale facial make-up which announced visually to us that a performance treat was in store later on after our classroom visits. Personal decorations and scenery props were used to suggest the exotic locales of Chinese minority peoples. Tibetan costumes seemed rather popular in all schools. Bright colored circlets of plumes, long vivid scarlet ribbons and banners, crepe paper flower pom-poms, large cardboard and paper mache props, such as orange and gold and silver "trains", two foot carrots and cabbages, were among the many materials used in music, dance and drama even by toddlers and young preschoolers. The huge vegetables, for example, were props for a thematic play which pantomimed eloquently the hard work the children carried out in their school garden (the very garden that we had been admiring outdoors earlier) and the mobilization of their personal resources in the growing of vegetables. The finale celebrated the children's asstounding gardening success and the large colorful vegetables were then lugged offstage by the kindergarten thespians.

The pervasive real-life themes (children herding sheep to shelter in a snowstorm, milkmaids at work, soldiers washing their clothes in basins, etc) of operatic and ballet performances in China contrasted strikingly with the prevalance of mythological and psychological themes more frequently present in these art forms in our own Western culture and in the traditional Kabuki theatre and Bunraku puppet dramas of Japan. Indeed, fairy-tale or mythic themes were also popular in the Peking Op-

era ballets in China prior to the Cultural Revolution. On occasion, some of the traditional mythological art forms were present in the children's performances. The dragon, that beloved symbol of longevity and high drama, was put on as a headdress in a playlet performed in one of the kindergartens we visited.

In China, each performance, and these were frequently informal as well as formal, provided an occasion for even very young children to develop an awareness and an appreciation of aesthetics. Here is a detailed example of a teacher guiding an informal dramatic play episode with her class, which was on a patio out of doors on a bright hot day: Some of the kindergarten children in her group donned bunny ears and hats and carried colorful construction paper baskets with green shredded paper to represent grass. The children were to act out the story of a young child responsible for leading his (or her) commune's rabbits (acted by other children) out of their pen (symbolized by decorated poles held by some children) and onto the fresh green grass (to be imagined) where they were to graze and grow plump. One little rabbit acted rather lonely and stayed apart from the others. The story line required the child in charge of the rabbits to help this bunny rejoin his buddies and then all bunnies nibbled zestfully (pantomime) and peacefully alongside their comrades. This playlet was acted out several times during the long class session. Each time, different groups of children donned the costumes and assumed different roles. The children , whether they were actors or seated audience, seemed to enjoy the spectacle anew with each repetition.

Interestingly, Chinese children in a Hong Kong kindergarten

were absorbed in much the same genre of dramatic dress-up play with each other in a classroom. Groups of children wore horned-cow head-dresses and vigorously acted out a pantomime sketch for and with each other.

Music

A high regard for participatory musical experiences was evident in all the schools we visited in China. In the Children's Palaces, music was everywhere treasured, played, studied, enjoyed- both with traditional Chinese instruments, such as the arrhu (the Chinese violin) and with Western ones. The competence and performing grace of young children as soloists or as members of an orchestra or band was extraordinary. Instrumental and singing lessons and rehearsals were enthusiastically entered into. A special sing-song tone of voice was often used by the children in musical renditions. In contrast, Chinese children singing in music class in Hong Kong public schools sang in voice tones such as are used in our own country.

In China there was a strong emphasis on music which was thematic and appropriate to the goals of the Cultural Revolution. Esoteric or "elitist" music was discouraged. Some songs seemed to serve the goals of revolution more than the goals of child development. For example, on several occasions we heard children perform a song which militantly vowed to aid what the song proclaimed as the longing of "Taiwanese brothers" for their freedom. We did enjoy one of the current children's songs so thoroughly - "Wo ai Peking Tien An Men (I love Peking's Tien An Men Square) that we as a group learned the song together. There did seem to be a large repertoire of enjoyable melodies and rhythms for children despite the politicized thematic content of many songs.

Nature and Outdoor Beauty

In Japan, the use of plant and flower arrangements to create pauses of beauty in the landscape was typical of the school grounds we visited as well as of the parks and shrines where school children are frequently taken on outings by parents and by schools. Japanese children are exposed to the composition of aesthetic harmonies through ritualized and carefully carried out flower and plant arrangements. The significance and importance of natural beauty as an aesthetic value was particularly highlighted for us during a visit to the Haian Shrine in Kyoto. Children and parents wandered everywhere, gazing at the charming artificial lake whose banks were fringed with tall irises blazing in purples and other more subtle hues. Here and there a parent paused, even crouched down on a flagstone, to point out carefully to her young children a particularly beautiful bloom or the vista of graceful iris clusters across the lake.

In China, greenery for aesthetic enjoyment alone was not common. In Peking, well-swept and tidy dirt expanses rather than greenery extended between the trees that line parkways. A small park in Shanghai along the riverfront charged admission. Flower beds, such as the bed of roses in front of the main office of a large commune we visited, were a rarity. Yet everywhere greenery that was edible as well as graceful was available for children. Children were helping to harvest long green onions and the fat green cabbage heads which were ripe in June. Each kindergarten had a large well-tended vegetable plot and often hutches for rab-

bits. Perhaps flower gardens and sweeping lawns are ornamental luxuries which must yield in priority at present in China to the greenery of agricultural production.

Food

All the Asian sites we visited provided a gourmet's delight of tastes, textures and colors in the meals available. A visit to the kitchens of a factory canteen left us envying the workers their ordinary daily cafeteria fare - and the fantastically low prices. In a Japanese kindergarten, we were fortunate enough to watch hundreds of chopsticks experts - children eating the box lunches they had brought from home. One kindergarten generously provided each of us with a typical box lunch consisting of raw fish slices, seaweed-wrapped rice with roe and hunks of cold fried squash. The meal was like an artistic collage, too beautiful to eat (almost). Children in group care in China, Japan and Hong Kong appeared very well fed and healthy with access to their own culturally rich culinary her

Clothing, Textiles, and Shop Decorations

Clothing was an area wherecultural differences were readily apparent. In China, older children and adults for the most part wear dark slacks and long sleeved shirts. The sobriety of adult clothing is in marked contrast to the gayly-colored clothes and hair ribbons and the red pioneer scarves which adorn children. The colorful clothing for children in China seemed to be one more sign of the loving care with which young children were treated and respected everywhere we travelled in China. China may not yet have economic resourses sufficient for the planting of gar-

dens and parks for the children of her crowded cities. Her shops may be somewhat drab in contrast to the torrents of colorful signs and advertisements that seem to descend on the pedestrian in the streets of Kowloon (in Hong Kong) or in Tokyo. Yet the children of China, with their bright clothing and hair bows and their even brighter eyes seemed themselves like the most precious artistic adornments of their society.

Conclusions

Our visit to children's care settings in three Asian sites opened our eyes to the potential that every people and culture has for enriching the lives of children aesthetically. In so many facets of daily living experiences children can be imbued with a sense of beauty, grace, pride in cultural heritage, and excellence in personal accomplishment in the arts as well as an appreciation of the many varieties of aesthetic experiences.

We learned too that sometimes there may be less of one aesthetic factor in a given cultural milieu, but this may be compensated for by enhancements and support in another area. Thus the growth of aesthetic sensibility and artistic skills may be well nourished in children wherever they live and learn.